DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 857 IR 003 487

AUTHOR	Comstock, George
TITLE	Research and the Constructive Aspects of Television in Children's Lives: A Forecast.
INSTITUTION	Rand Corp., Santa Monica, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, New York, N.Y.
REPORT NO	RAND-P-5622
PUB DATE	Mar 76
NOTE	13p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Broadcast Industry; *Children; Commercial Television; Programing (Broadcast); *Research Needs; Socialization; Social Sciences; Speeches; *Television; *Television Research

ABSTRACT

The future of research on the constructive aspects of television in the lives of children is contingent on the resolution of several challenges. First, philosophical conflicts associated with the premise that manipulation through broadcast policy is justifiable must be resolved. It is not certain that there is general agreement about prosocial goals when they are sought outside the protective concept of education. Also, research on constructive aspects must avoid taking energy and attention away from important investigations of negative effects. The theoretical framework relating research on televised violence to that on prosocial effects must be outlined. Finally, research must be geared to the realities of the broadcast industry. The guidance needed by broadcasters will be provided by research results that concentrate on program elements that can be changed and that have high credibility. The tendency of social science to value the original, postive empirical finding must be restrained, because replication is necessary to provide the necessary credibility, and null findings could be very important. (Author/PF)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED122857

RESEARCH AND THE CONSTRUCTIVE ASPECTS OF TELEVISION IN CHILDREN'S LIVES: A FORECAST

George Comstock
The Rand Corporation

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

IR003487

This paper was delivered at the symposium, "Perspectives on the Influence of Television on the Development of Children," at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, California, April 19-23, 1976. Support for its preparation was provided under a grant from the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation to the Communications Policy Program of The Rand Corporation.

One of the major legacies of the Surgeon General's study of television violence is a marked widening within the scientific community of the variety of possible effects of television which merit study. The special scientific advisory committee assembled for that undertaking concluded that the evidence was more consistent with the proposition that the viewing of television violence increases the subsequent aggressiveness of young persons. The reverberations of that conclusion, which at the time seemed to many social scientists to be phrased in terms so qualified as to be neither clear to the public nor reflective of the strength of the evidence, continue, and include the "family viewing" hour codes adopted by the industry in early 1975 (Wiley, 1975). These reverberations also include the reshaping of the priorities of social science in regard to television and children.

It is not so often that one can see such shifts unfold. Usually, intellectual currents alter direction in the dark generated by our attention to more concrete matters, and the change only becomes visible in some distant future time when someone looks back. As a result, we have an unusual opportunity to reflect on the direction we have taken.

Two New Priorities

One of the major new directions is the study of television's contribution to constructive or "prosocial" effects. A Rand study, based on interviews with leading social scientists concerned with television and human behavior, concluded that this was now the issue holding the highest degree of interest within the broader topic of television and socialization, which in turn was the broad topic commanding highest interest (Comstock and Lindsey, 1975). The same study also reported increasing interest in making the research done on television and children have a greater influence on broadcast practices.

The influence of the Surgeon General's study is apparent. Before that event, the top issue would have been the effects of television violence, with primary attention to its causal role in subsequent

aggressiveness. The positive inference reached by the scientific advisory committee reduced interest in that particular causal question. Many social scientists were inclined to agree with Leifer, Gordon, and Graves (1973) that science had gone as far as methods would permit. At the same time, that positive inference was a signal for the pursuit of other effects. Prosocial effects have become of predominant interest partly because they roughly fit the same theoretical framework and design paradigm that had been developed in connection with the study of violence--social psychology, and in particular social learning theory (Bandura, 1971, 1973) and disinhibition or situational cue theory (Berkowitz, 1962, 1973), and the laboratory-type experiment.

The Surgeon General's study also can be said to have strongly encouraged the interest in making media research more policy relevant, although in this case the Surgeon General's study simply socialized the communications research community to a concern which has been growing in influence in other areas of the social sciences over the past two decades. Prosocial effects have become of predominant interest also partly because they offer some promise of offering evidence for the recasting of the medium. The two trends, then, are closely related and, at least for the present, reinforce each other.

The Future Is Contingent

The future for these trends is contingent on a number of factors. There is a small literature where a decade ago there was none, and most of the items have appeared in the past three or four years. Among the outcomes in which there is interest are rule adherence, delay of gratification, sharing, helping, sympathy, cooperation, empathy, self-esteem, aesthetic appreciation, and cognitive and perceptual capabilities (for a review of some of the topics given priority, see Lesser, 1976; Mielke, 1976; and Siegel, 1976). There is a great deal of enthusiasm. One can readily agree that research that would make television a more positive force in the lives of children merits high priority. Yet, it is too soon to conclude that there is a high probability of research with such an effect because there are a number of challenges which must be confronted.

Justifying Manipulation

One premise of research on the prosocial effects of television that purports to be relevant to broadcast policy is that manipulation is justifiable. It is not at all clear that the various philosophical conflicts associated with the premise can be resolved. As a result, the attraction of this approach may dim, because those same conflicts will defeat the goal of translating the findings into improved television.

In this respect, antisocial and prosocial effects are not quite symmetrical. There is more agreement about the nature of what is antisocial. The content that is under scrutiny is the natural outgrowth of our system of broadcasting, and the practical implication of the research is that such content should be reduced. This is very different from choosing to enhance the likelihood of a particular kind of behavior or the holding of a particular attitude. Our norms encourage such calculated manipulation in the case of education (and so the label of "educational" makes the use of research in behalf of the effectiveness of the productions of Children's Television Workshop acceptable). Our norms discourage it in the case of entertainment, where the audience member (or parent) does not enter into an implicit contract that cognitive, affective, or behavioral change is a likely outcome.

It has been suggested that such research can proceed on the basis of goals that are generally agreed upon (Leifer, Gordon, and Graves, 1973). However, it is not at all certain that there is a very widespread agreement about such goals when they are sought outside the protective concept of education. It seems likely that the various possibilities are in fact arranged on a continuum from greater to lesser public acceptance, and that the specification of those which could be said to have general acceptance is itself a task for research.

Related to the problem of manipulation is the triggering effect of the jargon. "Prosocial" very often inspires antagonism and leads to a debate on who is to say what is prosocial for a given person or a given situation. The social scientist understands that this is a code word for responses thought to be normative and desirable in circumstances in which aggressive responses do not have that status, and

that the evaluation of any specific response depends on the circumstances and the values of the observer. The persons with whom he must deal, including broadcasters, parents, and policymakers, do not.

Avoiding Diversiveness

The goal of the kind of research under scrutiny is the improvement of television. It would be counter-productive were that research to take energy and attention away from investigations focused on negative effects, thereby in effect reducing the contribution of research to better television.

The most plausible interpretation of the evidence available is that the viewing of television violence increases the likelihood of subsequent aggressiveness on the part of young viewers (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1962; Bogart, 1972; Chaffee, 1972; Comstock, 1972; Goranson, 1969, 1970; Krull and Watt, 1973; Liebert, Neale, and Davidson, 1973; Shirley, 1973; Singer, 1971; Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1972). However, this interpretation rests on the consistency of evidence from a variety of sources, no one of which is beyond skepticism, and although the evidence is sufficient to give us an answer, we would be in error to believe that answer is incontrovertible.

More important, there are three major topics subsumed under the violence issue about which we know very, very little and about which we should find out much more. Even if we accept the causal interpretation, we do not know the social importance of that relationship. We do not know whether the numbers affected are large or small, or whether the social damage is great or minor. We also do not fully understand the mechanisms by which such effects may occur, despite the major work done on characteristics of portrayals (or, in the psychological jargon, of "models") (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1962, 1973), situational factors (Berkowitz, 1973), and physiological arousal (Tannenbaum, 1972, 1975). And we know almost nothing about the role of various mediating factors and, in particular, the potential for intervention to mitigate any harmful effect.

The violence issue is not dead, either in terms of science or of policy. It would be unfortunate were worthy new interests to stand in the way of building on the substantial foundation that has been laid. Furthermore, research on prosocial effects has a self-interest in furthering the work on violence, because it is demonstrating the viability and importance of research on the effects of mass media on the young, because it is producing findings on which prosocial research can draw, and because the findings also will help prosocial research clarify its own theoretical differences, identity, and contribution.

Resolving Theoretical Conflicts

The working hypothesis of research on prosocial effects is that if viewing a portrayal of violence increases aggressiveness, then viewing portrayals of other kinds of behavior may increase their display. However, while the research on violence has high relevance to that on prosocial effects, there are also some conflicts which have yet to be analyzed in a systematic way.

One concerns the role of drive factors. Although there are studies in which violence viewing is followed by increased aggression in the absence of prior frustration, it is typical to increase the experimental design's sensitivity for detecting an effect by inducing frustration to insure that some aggressive drive is present. If drive is necessary, how is prosocial research going to obtain its positive findings?

Another concerns the nature of the acts involved. Social learning theory deals with the acquisition of behavior. Aggression fits its requirements perfectly, because discrete physical acts are involved. These acts, either separately or in the particular combination or sequence in which they are presented, are novel to the young viewer until he sees them portrayed on television. In the prosocial area, the analogue would seem to be specific, novel acts of intervention, such as bandaging a person or a fire rescue by improvised means, and not such general categories as helping, sympathy, or generosity. Unlike acts of aggression, the latter often involve behavior that is neither novel, discrete, nor particularly physical. If there is this kind of

difference in the character of the behavior involved in the aggressive and prosocial domains, the theory dealing with prosocial effects must include a set of rules to clearly specify the circumstances in which effects can be expected. One reason is to identify classes of behavior meriting study on the grounds of high potential for finding some impact of television. Another is to help explain the null findings that will have accumulated if classes of behavior with a low potential for impact are inadvertently studied.

Still another concerns the factors mediating the effect. Aggressiveness is ambiguous in degree of social approval; in many circumstances it is approved, in many others, including most everyday interaction, it is not. Most behavior falling under the prosocial rubric is unambiguously approved in all circumstances. Reward or lack of punishment for the perpetrator in a violent portrayal has been shown to increase subsequent aggressiveness on the part of the child viewer (Rosekrans and Hartup, 1967; Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963). Presumably, the mechanism is an alteration in the child's expectation of outcome, either in terms of approval or payoff. Can one expect the same factors to mediate the effect of a portrayal when the behavior in question is not at all ambiguous in regard to social approval? And if the operative psychological mechanism is an alteration in expectation of payoff rather than approval, many persons inside and outside the social sciences will find themselves in conflict about the desirability of the inconsistency between the act, which is prosocial, and the motive, which is selfish, and uncertain whether the means are appropriate to the ends.

In short, there are many aspects of the study of the effects of violent portrayals and other kinds of portrayals which are asymmetrical. The success of the study of such other kinds of portrayals is dependent on the explication of that asymmetry and the resolution of the problems it raises.

Facing Broadcast Reality

The goal of influencing broadcast television by findings about the potential constructive contributions of television to children

will be realized only if social science takes into account certain realities of broadcasting. Three that merit emphasis are: (a) the need for evidence on program elements that can be manipulated or changed; (b) the demand for findings credible in regard to real-life impact; and, (c) the tendency of the industry to be more concerned about excluding the undesirable than inserting the desirable.

Broadcasters generally work in absolutes. Social scientists think and work in terms of continuous variables--"more" vs. "less" as opposed to an absolute cut-off or point of precipitation. As a result, the work of the latter is often not useful to the former. The violence literature is an example. Although violence has been decreased in various ways on national television, the real questions the television producer has is, "Is it all right to show X?" "Y?" "Z?" No one is really quite sure whether the kind of violence that is being eliminated is of a really harmful kind. This disturbs the industry, not only because profits may be threatened, but because it introduces new and difficult to resolve conflicts between the "creative people" and the "gatekeepers."

Broadcasters, because of the very uncertain craft of creating programs with wide appeal, are disinclined to be burdened by unnecessary admonitions. Industry response to the violence studies is illustrative. Although there are numerous signs that the industry is tentatively accepting the hypothesis that violent television contributes to some degree to undesirable aggressiveness on the part of young viewers, with the "family viewing" hour the most obvious, the industry ignored the evidence from laboratory-type experiments for a decade on the grounds that the setting was artificial and the way aggression was measured did not reflect real-life "true" aggression. The lesson for prosocial research is obvious: If it is to influence broadcasting, the results must have high face credibility.

There are currently many examples of efforts by the industry to present television for children that will have a beneficial effect on them. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the industry is far better prepared to restrict allegedly undesirable content than to promote allegedly desirable content. Any calculated attempts to design programs with a specific beneficent impact occur on a program-by-program

basis; undesirable material is screened across all programs by the broadcast standards departments of each network, in accord with the interpretation made of the National Association of Broadcasters code by the network. And these specialists in omission are unlikely to become specialists in inclusion because the role of "guardian" is acceptable whereas the role of "manipulator" is not. To have any effect, then, the results of prosocial research will have to be filtered through the producers of specific programs or translated into the prohibition of some class of content.

Restraining Science's Tenets

The currency of social science is the original, positive empirical finding. The central bank responsible for this is the graduate school. The graduate school is the scientist's major agent of socialization, and two tenets it champions is the notion that replication is less valuable than investigation of a new issue and that null findings are of little interest. Both of these tenets must be held in restraint if social science is to influence broadcasting.

Replication is necessary in order to provide the necessary credibility. In addition, because practical decisions are at stake and the risk of causing unintended harm is minimal, one may wish to insure overlooking any potentially beneficial contribution by being somewhat less demanding for the tentative acceptance of a hypothesis than the conventional scientific criteria (of $<.05$ or $<.01$) and, instead, rely for increased certainty on replication. Whatever our criteria, we will want to take null findings seriously, because they help to identify aspects of program content with minimal chance of beneficial impact, thereby guiding attention and energies toward aspects with greater potential impact.

The Future

The future of research on the constructive aspects of television in the lives of children is contingent on the resolution of these challenges. It is asking a great deal for science to build theory and deal

with concrete, pragmatic issues at the same time. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how such such research otherwise can have much chance of influencing broadcasting to the benefit of its young viewers. Because the task is so difficult, one cannot be optimistic about the outcome. There is every reason to believe that there will be advances in theory and in understanding of human behavior through the study of television's prosocial influence because these are the goals science and scientists are best prepared to serve. These are justification enough for undertaking such research. In addition, the possible gains of increasing television's positive influence are great enough to justify such research despite the many problems which stand in the way of practical impact. One is therefore confident that at least for the immediate future pioneering in this direction will continue. Whether or not the television viewed by children will ever be different as a result is far less certain.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bandura, A. Influence of models' reinforcement contingencies on the acquisition of imitative responses. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1965, *1*, 589-595.

Bandura, A. *Social learning theory*. New York: General Learning Press, 1971.

Bandura, A. *Aggression: A social learning analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973.

Bandura, A., Ross, D., and Ross, S. A. Vicarious reinforcement and imitative learning. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1963, *67*, 601-607.

Berkowitz, L. *Aggression: A social psychological analysis*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.

Berkowitz, L. Words and symbols as stimuli to aggressive responses. In J. S. Knutson (Ed.), *Control of aggression: Implications from basic research*. Chicago: Aldine, 1973. Pp. 113-143.

Bogart, L. Warning, the Surgeon General has determined that TV violence is moderately dangerous to your child's mental health. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1972, *36*, 491-521.

Chaffee, S. H. Television and adolescent aggressiveness. In G. A. Comstock and E. A. Rubinstein (Eds.), *Television and adolescent aggressiveness*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972. Pp. 1-34.

Comstock, G. A. *Television violence: Where the Surgeon General's study leads*. Santa Monica, Calif.: The Rand Corporation, 1972. P-4831.

Comstock. G. A., and Lindsey, G. *Television and human behavior: The research horizon, future and present*. Santa Monica, Calif.: The Rand Corporation, 1975. R-1748-CF.

Goranson, R. E. A review of recent literature on psychological effects of media portrayals of violence. In R. K. Baker and S. J. Ball (Eds.), *Violence and the media. A staff report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969. Pp. 395-413.

Goranson, R. E. Media violence and aggressive behavior: A review of experimental research. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 5. New York: Academic Press, 1970. Pp. 1-31.

Krull, R., and Watt, J. H., Jr. Television viewing and aggression: An examination of three models. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Montreal, April, 1973.

Leifer, A. D., Gordon, N. J., and Graves, S. B. Children and television: Recommended directions for future efforts. Center for Research in Children's Television, Harvard University, May 1973, Final Report to the Office of Child Development, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

Lesser, G. S. Workshop III: Research to guide the non-regulatory sector. In *Television and children*. New York: The Ford Foundation, 1976.

Liebert, R. M., Neale, J. M., and Davidson, E. S. *The early window: Effects of television on children and youth*. Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon Press, 1973.

Mielke, K. Workshop IV: Research to guide the non-regulatory sector. In *Television and children*. New York: The Ford Foundation, 1976.

Rosekrans, M. A., and Hartup, W. W. Imitative influences of consistent and inconsistent response consequences to a model on aggressive behavior in children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, *5(4)*, 424-434.

Shirley, K. W. Television and children: A modeling analysis review essay. Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 1973.

Siegel, A. Workshop V: Research to increase scientific knowledge. In *Television and children*. New York: The Ford Foundation, 1976.

Singer, J. L. The influence of violence portrayed in television or motion pictures upon overt aggressive behavior. In J. L. Singer (Ed.), *The control of aggression and violence: Cognitive and physiological factors*. New York: Academic Press, 1971. Pp. 19-60.

Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. *Television and growing up: The impact of televised violence*. Report to the Surgeon General, United States Public Health Service. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972.

Tannenbaum, P. H. Studies in film- and television-mediated arousal and aggression: A progress report. In G. A. Comstock, E. A. Rubinstein, and J. P. Murray (Eds.), *Television and social behavior*. Vol. 5. *Television's effects: Further explorations*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972. Pp. 309-350.

Tannenbaum, P. H., and Zillmann, D. Emotional arousal in the facilitation of aggression through communication. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 8. New York: Academic Press, 1975. Pp. 149-152.

Wiley, R. E. Remarks. Unpublished address presented at an invitational conference, Research on Television and Children and Youth -- What Are the Priorities? co-sponsored by the Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, Reston, Virginia, November 5-7, 1975.